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16 May 2014

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Cairns, Lucille (2014) 'Righteous realism versus postmodern play : the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in female-authored French fiction.', *Modern and contemporary France*, 22 (1). pp. 71-84.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2013.867151>

Publisher's copyright statement:

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‘Righteous Realism Versus Post-Modern Play: the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Female-Authored French Fiction’¹

This article analyses literary mediations of French Jewish attitudes towards Israel, and particularly towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That conflict is of crucial concern at a transnational level, not least for reasons of both domestic and global security, but it touches a particularly raw nerve in France, for two reasons. First, France is unique in being home to both the largest Jewish and the largest Arab populations in Europe. Second, since the Second Intifada (beginning in September 2000) the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has tended to be acted out (not, unfortunately, worked through) in the French *banlieues*. My two case studies are novels by Jewish women that appeared in the new millennium: Olivia Rosenthal’s *Les Fantaisies spéculatives de J.H. le sémite* (2005),² and Chantal Osterreicher’s *L’Insouciance d’Adèle* (2006).³ Their publication was certainly no ‘exception française’, and thus challenges one of the claims made in Anny Dayan-Rosenman’s otherwise excellent study ‘The Israeli-Palestinian conflict in France: a Conflict in Search of Novelistic Representations’ (2010) that ‘French novels seem to have in some way abdicated the powers of fiction, and have given up portraying this unsolvable conflict’.⁴ The two texts do, nonetheless, represent antithetical approaches towards Israel, both aesthetically and politically. Osterreicher’s righteous realism supports a defensive and at least partly valorizing view, while Rosenthal’s postmodern play is, albeit obliquely and intermittently, critical and even censorious.

Given the status of both authors as French-born Jews (although Osterreicher now lives in Israel), both can be seen to mediate heterodox attitudes to the conflict. The heterodoxy evidently depends upon our placing of the two authors. In the context of the twenty-first-century France in which *L’Insouciance d’Adèle* was published, which, like most other countries in the global mediasphere, regularly reproves Israel, Osterreicher eloquently contests default-position anti-Zionism. On the other hand, in the context of the French Jewry to which Rosenthal belongs, which (at least through its official institutions such as *le CRIF*)⁵ has traditionally evinced unflinching solidarity with Israel, Rosenthal’s own critique of that country’s treatment of the Palestinians is equally contestatory, and no less impactful than Osterreicher’s reverse discourse. An additional axis of enquiry in this article is the extent to which there may be some convergence as well as divergence between these two otherwise antinomous texts.

Before examining the texts themselves, I would like briefly to set them in a historical and political context. For some twenty years after the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, France maintained extremely cordial relationships with the fledgling nation. In the immediate post-war period, this was partly to do with guilt about France's complicity in the Shoah, during the Fourth Republic, it was partly to do with Israel's socialist ideals and energy (demonstrated not least in its unique, arguably utopian, institution of the kibbutzim); and throughout those twenty years, it was much to do with basic (one is tempted to say base) economic interests. Avi Primor, ambassador to the European Union from 1987 to 1993, vice-president of the University of Tel Aviv until 2004, and now a leading sponsor of J-Call, puts the case succinctly: 'À partir des années 1950, la coopération entre la France et Israël s'intensifia à un rythme tout à fait inattendu. Le coeur de cette coopération fut, bien sûr, l'armement'.⁶ Truth be told, France appears to have forged a veritable "special relationship" with Israel in the first two decades of the latter's existence. The hard core of that special relationship was a mutually beneficial military-industrial complex which tends to be conveniently erased from the collective memory of twenty-first-century France:

L'aviation française régnait dans l'armée de l'air israélienne. Avec cette flotte aérienne, Israël remporta des victoires écrasantes et durant de longues années le ciel du Proche-Orient. [...] En fait, Israël était émerveillé. Ce petit pays plus ou moins boycotté par le monde entier, et dont la survie même n'était pas évidente, trouvait un ami, par miracle. Et quel ami! Un grand, un fort, un "allié". Le premier. Un vrai.⁷

But from 1967, after the Six Day War in June and de Gaulle's notorious criticism in November of Jews as 'ce peuple d'élite, sûr de lui et dominateur',⁸ the friendship came to an abrupt end. From this point on, French foreign policy, keen to gain leverage from pre-existing links established during the colonial era, became progressively pro-Arab and, correspondingly, progressively anti-Israeli. The new coolness towards Israel was not limited to France's political class. Political sociologist Pierre Birnbaum reflects on its presence among French Jewish intellectuals also:

De nos jours, on ne peut que constater à quel point persistent l'indifférence ou le refus sioniste d'un grand nombre d'intellectuels juifs, de Pierre Vidal-Naquet à Edgar Morin ou encore Jacques Derrida. Énoncée cette fois non en fonction de la tradition patriotique du franco-judaïsme mais à partir de considérations tiers-mondistes et anti-colonialistes, leur hostilité à l'égard du projet sioniste n'en est que plus vive et plus éclatante.⁹

Since the Second Intifada, France has witnessed an alarming rise in anti-Semitic attacks, of which perhaps the most horrific was the torture (prolonged over three weeks) and murder of Ilan Halimi in 2006 by a twenty-strong gang led by Youssouf Fofana. Esther Benbassa, a historian who is intensely critical of Israel, herself concedes a hypothesis widely endorsed by the French Jewish community, particularly in its official institutions:

Even if one may argue that such phenomena have been exaggerated and the resultant fears exploited, it would be foolish to ignore the widespread identification of French Muslim Arabs with Palestinians, their strong resentment against Jews who have been more successful as a minority, and the resultant anti-Semitic attitudes and behaviors.¹⁰

It was from this highly charged material matrix that both Rosenthal's and Osterreicher's novels emerged, but the two take markedly different approaches to the crisis in French-Jewish identity generated within that matrix. While Osterreicher's *L'Insouciance d'Adèle* was published a year later, it is less complex than Rosenthal's *Les Fantaisies spéculatives de J.H. le sémite*, and so will be discussed first.

Osterreicher's novel adopts the mode of mimetic realism and refuses ambiguity, inscribing unashamed, indeed adamant vindication of Israel. At first sight, the spatial setting is recognizably Paris, the temporal setting the first three to four years of the twenty-first century (established by allusions to the Second Intifada and to Yasser Arafat as a living person). It has well drawn characters, and a clear plot-line which includes the vagaries of the eponymous Adèle's troubled romance with the gentile Fabien. However, it also contains less formulaic qualities than this brief summary might suggest. The temporal level comes periodically to be split between the diegetic present of the 2000s and the diegetic past of the 1940s, and the spatial level periodically moves between France and Poland, as Osterreicher intersperses the main narrative focalized on Adèle with anamnestic narrative from her grandmother, a survivor both of the Warsaw Ghetto and of Auschwitz. And while the romance with Fabien is an important factor in the narrative economy, ultimately the novel subverts the codes of the romance genre. For once, love does not conquer all. Instead, love is conquered by a duty felt by Adèle towards her Jewish family and towards all Jews murdered in the Shoah: the duty to start her own Jewish family and so help renew Jewry (p. 168) – and to optimize fulfilment of this duty, emigration to Israel is deemed necessary. Accordingly, the enduring centrality of the Shoah to Israel is flagged. Its initial centrality has recently been reiterated by Élie Barnavi in Régis Debray's *À un ami israélien. Avec une réponse d'Elie*

Barnavi (2010): ‘Car, contrairement à ce que tu affirmes, c’est bien la Shoah qui a fondé l’État d’Israël. L’idée a précédé Hitler, mais c’est Hitler qui en a rendu la réalisation possible’.¹¹ Further, a parallel is drawn by Adèle between indifference to the Shoah and contemporary indifference to the terrorist murders of Israeli civilians. When Fabien switches television channels to avoid pictures of a suicide attack in Israel, Adèle remonstrates thus:

Je ne sais pas si c’est le fait de ne pas voir l’image du bus explosé qui m’a choquée. Non, c’est vraiment le fait de te voir changer de chaîne juste à ce moment-là. C’est comme ci, en plein milieu d’un documentaire sur la Shoah, tu décidais de regarder le foot. (p. 96)

In contriving for the French-born Adèle to fulfil a duty to her highly integrated Jewish family by leaving it for Israel, Osterreicher’s novel, like Rosenthal’s a year before, foregrounds a crisis in twenty-first-century French Jewish identity. That crisis is adumbrated in Haïm Bouzaglo’s preface: ‘Il me semble, après cette lecture, qu’il est plus facile d’être Israélien en Israël que Juif en France, surtout quand on ne cache pas son judaïsme et qu’on s’efforce au contraire d’en repousser les limites’ (p. 10).

Why, according to Osterreicher’s account, is it so difficult to be an “out” Jew in contemporary France? One reason suggested by that account is the inalienable bond between diasporic Jews and Israel. In this account, French Jews are deeply exercised by Israel’s vulnerability as an enclave surrounded by hostile countries, and yet they also view Israel’s very existence as a bulwark against a second Shoah. Witness Adèle’s grandmother Frania, a survivor long domiciled in France: ‘«Maintenant, avec Israël, on est protégés, déclare-t-elle’ (p. 109). Frania’s belief sits in tension with the novel’s rendering of Israel as an endangered state. Frania performs a similar narrative function to Leah’s in the novel *The Covenant* (2004) by American-born, now Israeli-domiciled Naomi Ragen,¹² where Leah, grandmother of Ragen’s chief protagonist Elise, is also an Auschwitz survivor and also ascribes to Israel a protective status vis-à-vis Jews. The difference is that Frania is not forced like Leah to confront Israel’s exposure to terrorism on a personal level (Leah’s grandchild and son-in-law are kidnapped, and her son-in-law eventually killed, by Hamas).

In Osterreicher’s account, another reason - intimately linked to the first - for the profound problems encountered in being an “out” Jew in contemporary France is the systematic prejudice of the French media against Israel. That prejudice is framed as the key source of wider, axiomatically hostile, public perceptions of Israel in France. Again, this is

adumbrated in the novel's preface when Bouzaglo implies the pro-Arab/anti-Israeli bias of French media in his reference to 'les filtres déformants de la France' (p. 9).¹³ Osterreicher's novel conveys this bias very early on (p. 13), when the French radio covers in great detail a new Israeli incursion into the occupied territories, but omits to mention the cause of that incursion - a suicide attack on Israelis which prompts their army to seek out the perpetrators in the most obvious place. The French radio's choice to present the perpetrators as activists rather than terrorists exposes a clear ideological *parti pris* against Israel.¹⁴ The *parti pris* is reiterated seven pages later, this time in relation to French television. Here, the French television channels choose not to report an attack in Haifa which has left many Israelis dead (p. 21). Even when attacks are reported they are, insists Adèle's cousin Jocelyne, cynically minimized:

A la télévision, quand il y a un attentat, on ne voit jamais, je ne sais pas moi, d'images des familles de victimes par exemple. Ou bien de civils choqués. Tout au plus, on nous montre deux secondes un bus déchiqueté, de loin. On n'entend pas un témoin, on ne voit pas un seul visage. Ah si, quand quelqu'un est interviewé, c'est un excité français ou américain qui ne veut pas évacuer une implantation illégale. (p. 22)

Note that Jocelyne's position, whilst clearly pro-Israeli, acknowledges the illegality of the settlements. Such balance is conspicuously lacking in the comments of two young men overheard by Adèle at a party held by Virginie, girlfriend of her closest friend Krim – who is, significantly, of Arab origin:

« Ce qui est aberrant, c'est de voir que ces territoires, ils les occupent de manière totalement illégale. Ils n'ont rien à foutre là-bas. Et tous les jours ils détruisent des baraques avec leurs putains de tanks, dit l'un d'eux, la voix traînante.

- Ils se considèrent toujours comme les victimes. N'empêche que l'Etat d'Israël s'est construit sur une purification ethnique. Et maintenant, le pays vit sous un régime d'apartheid, avec un boucher à la tête du gouvernement, dit un autre avec plus de verve.

- Ils sont sans légalité, reprend le premier. Ils envahissent des territoires qui ne sont même pas à eux. L'Amérique leur a toujours tout donné. Ils ont tous, et les Palestiniens, ils n'ont rien [...] (p. 58)

Adèle's sharply ironic riposte to this diatribe implies what she sees as both the young men's manipulation by the French media and the cognitive inconsistencies of that manipulation ('Je trouve que pour un peuple qui gouverne le monde, ils s'en sortent drôlement mal les Juifs'):

« [...] Les Israéliens, c'est des envahisseurs, des colonisateurs avec à leur tête un boucher. Ils envoient l'Amérique faire la guerre à leur place pour éliminer leurs ennemis. Ils contrôlent le monde. Je trouve que pour un peuple qui gouverne le monde, ils s'en sortent drôlement mal les Juifs. Ils sont attaqués tous les jours dans leur pays. On n'en parle pas dans votre télé de tous les attentats évités tous les jours ? Et dans la télé, tu en as déjà vu des victimes d'attentats à qui il manque un bras, un œil ou une jambe ? Et des familles de victimes qui ont perdu un fils, une fille, un père, une mère, une femme, un mari, out tout ça réuni ? Tu en as vu beaucoup ? Tu les as entendus ? [...] Ça nous emmerde en Europe de voir que les Juifs se défendent, hein ? Ça n'a pas besoin de se défendre un Juif. Ça gouverne déjà le monde ! (p. 60)

Krim's own remark after the party suggests the superficiality and Manicheism of the party guests epitomized by the two young men, for whom friendship between an Arab and a Zionist is beyond the pale: 'Ma popularité auprès des potes de Virginie a dû littéralement s'effondrer. Un Arabe copain avec la sioniste de service, ce n'est pas très correct' (p. 62).

Irony also characterizes the effect wrought by a deficit of information from the mainstream French circuits about attacks on and murders of Israelis. For the effect on Adèle's highly integrated Jewish family is to turn to Jewish community radio; hardly a desirable turn of events within the logic of French Republicanism, with its antipathy for 'communautarisme' (p. 89). French media stacking of the odds against Israel is again underscored in Jocelyne's response to the question about why she and her husband have decided to emigrate to Israel at what is a particularly risky historical juncture (that of the Second Intifada). This is not mere repetition of a point already made, since there are two new elements in her answer. First, it evidences the serious psychological tensions induced in French Jews by such bias. Second, it points to the vital role of the Internet, with its wealth of uncensored data, in countering (at least in some of its websites) anti-Israeli propaganda – which often consists in omission of facts about Israeli victimhood, and strategic semantic choices rather than open verbal attacks (p. 122).

The introduction to this article stated that an additional axis of enquiry would be the extent to which there may be some convergence as well as divergence between Osterreicher's and Rosenthal's texts. One point of convergence is, precisely, the strong sense among French Jews that the French media indulges in pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli proselytism. The correlative of this is that in terms of its external image at least, Israel is – paradoxically, given reproof of it as a colonialist power - in some respects (and only in some respects) a heteronomous state, in so far as it is subordinated to another state: the transnational (fourth

e)state of corporate, ideologically invested media. A further convergence is that both texts use the rhetorical device of an Arab friend – in Osterreicher an actual friend, in Rosenthal an imaginary one – for the Jewish protagonist, to provide at least a potential ideological counterbalance.¹⁵ Admittedly, with Osterreicher the Arab friend Krim is remarkably phlegmatic, and his politically aware comments rare. Nevertheless, two such comments are noteworthy. One is how much easier it has been for Adèle, a descendant of Polish Jewish immigrants and therefore European-looking, to be entirely assimilated into French society than it has been for French citizens of Arab origin (p. 42). Another bears on religious French Jews' respect for the Republican duty imposed on them since the Revolution to reserve their difference uniquely for the private sphere – a duty with which Muslims in France have, on the whole, had far more difficulties (p. 42). Finally, Krim's sardonic riposte to Adèle's question about whether he might visit her in Israel emphasizes mutual mistrust between Israelis and Arabs generally (he is of Algerian origin) rather than Palestinians specifically:

- Pourquoi pas ? Je viendrai plonger à Eilat et danserai la hora sur les plages de Tel-Aviv! Tu penses sérieusement qu'on me laissera monter dans l'avion ?

- Effectivement, il faut t'attendre à être fouillé de fond en comble. (p. 185)

This is the extent of the Arab friend's contribution to the political mapping of Osterreicher's novel. It is a far more limited one than we find with his counterpart in Rosenthal's, where the (imaginary) Arab friend "Sindbad" (in fact his name morphs from the Persian, non-Arab "Sindbad" to "Mohamed" to "Ali", and to various combinations thereof) facilitates a genuinely dialogical structure of reflection.

Les Fantaisies spéculatives de J.H. le sémite is certainly not limited to dialogical reflection. Rosenthal mobilizes a polyphony, even a cacophony of voices competing to articulate the conundrum that is Jewish identity. Each chapter bears one or more epigraphs from the Torah, and is founded on the male protagonist J.H.'s fantasized violation of either the religious laws promulgated therein, or of secular Jewish norms deriving from such laws. Such violation is typically succeeded by fevered fantasies about the horrified response of his mother, the archetypal Jewish Mother. In fact, J.H. veers comically from one extreme to another in his invocation and ultimate abasement of numerous, often self-contradictory markers of Jewish identity. In this respect, he subverts what Žižek calls the traditional Jew's 'most basic *fidelity* to what one is':

The question is: is the name of the One the result of a contingent political struggle, or is it somehow rooted in a more substantial particular identity? The position of “Jewish Maoists” is that “Jews” is such a name which stands for that which resists today’s global trend to overcome all limitations, inclusive of the very finitude of the human condition, in radical capitalist “deterritorialization” and “fluidification” (the trend which reaches its apotheosis in the gnostic-digital dream of transforming humans themselves into virtual software that can reload itself from one hardware to another). The name “Jews” thus stands for the most basic *fidelity* to what one is.¹⁶

For J.H. the Semite, the name of the One is an enigma, as is fidelity to what one is, since what the Jew “is” is anything but one. To a certain – although far from exclusive – extent, this is because in French public perception Israel has become a metonymy for Jewry; and Israel is, for better or for worse, not a Jewish One, but rather a duality, even a deadly duel, between Israeli Jew and Palestinian Arab.

J.H.’s musings on Palestinian Arabs form a tongue-in-cheek parody of various extremes in Jewish positions, ranging from the paranoid to the romanticizing. In the discordant voices of his extravagant divagations, Rosenthal satirizes various stereotypes. These range from the implacably anti-Arab Jew to the do-gooding, (arguably) self-hating Jew, who self-aggrandizingly instrumentalizes the Palestinian cause in order to attack Jewry from within and thereby achieve a sense of moral superiority over his brethren. Even Jewish observation of a statistically proven fact, viz. the intensification of anti-Semitism in France since the start of the Second Intifada, is at one point reduced to a neurotic exaggeration (although later, on p. 104, the free indirect style indicates J.H.’s own, admittedly histrionic, awareness of that intensification: ‘L’Intifada est aux portes de Paris, pense J.H.’). Initially placing the expression of fear and endangerment in the mouth of J.H.’s cousin, Rosenthal then trivializes it by indices to the cousin’s actual robust health and spirits:

[...] ceux qui sont extérieurs ne comprennent pas mais il y a de quoi se faire du souci, c’est indéniable, les attentats se multiplient, les Juifs sont pourchassés hors même des frontières de leurs pays d’accueil, c’est horrible cette haine, cette insécurité, on se fait surtout du souci pour les enfants, dira son cousin germain, gaillard de bonne composition, grand, fort, épanoui en somme, le cousin de J.H. a très bien réussi dans la vie, a gagné et gagne encore beaucoup d’argent [...] (p. 61)

Of more interest for our purposes, though, is J.H.’s fantasy of nobly helping a Palestinian, initially through the results of his work as a biologist, and of receiving a letter of gratitude. Quickly dismissing the scenario as implausible, he disconcertingly starts to ventriloquize the bracketing of all Palestinians as craven and brainwashed :

Évidemment il y a très peu de chances que cela se produise. Un Palestinien qui bénéficierait d'un traitement médical conçu grâce aux recherches de J.H. ne prendrait pas le temps de lui écrire, mon nom sonne trop juif pense J.H., je n'ai aucune chance de recevoir une lettre d'un natif de cette région, non, un Palestinien n'aurait pas l'idée, le courage, il n'aurait pas l'indépendance d'esprit suffisante pour m'écrire, tous les Palestiniens sont victimes d'une idéologie haineuse qui les empêche de voir les choses telles qu'elles sont, par exemple qu'en Israël ce sont les Juifs qui travaillent, qui développent l'économie, participent à la croissance et font de la recherche, donc les Juifs font vivre les Palestiniens et eux ne s'en rendent même pas compte, l'idéologie dans laquelle ils baignent leur a ôté tout discernement.

In the paradigm of thesis-antithesis minus any synthesis that the reader is coming to recognize as his discursive trademark, J.H. soon leaps to a contrasting stance. Now he casts himself as figure of fraternity with Palestinians, frustrated in his good will by harassment from a dogmatic Jewish community (pp. 67-68). Galvanized by a glorious sense of martyrdom, his fantasies range from the improbable but possible – offering humanitarian aid as a Jew in the refugee camps – to the quirkily quixotic – giving a Palestinian a room in his own Paris home, and not just any old room, but a room that could in the future become his children's (p. 68).

As his roving imagination moves on to consider, with some delectation, his mother's appalled reaction to these new domestic arrangements, Rosenthal deploys an explicitly dialogical form to stage an ostensibly political conflict between himself and his mother. Descending into bathetic psychodrama, that conflict shades into quasi comic-strip hyperbole, humorously exploiting the cliché of the invasive Jewish mother, and also demeaning his apparently laudable intentions to make of the Arab a brother, as J.H. himself becomes an accomplice to the latter's (again, imagined) terrorism:

Je te confirme, chère mère, que tu es ici en présence d'un Palestinien, de surcroît ami de ton fils, de surcroît ami de sa femme, et terroriste de surcroît, d'ailleurs j'ai apporté un sac bourré d'explosifs que je te demande de cacher dans la maison, personne en effet n'aurait l'idée de venir fouiller l'appartement d'une vieille Juive comme toi, et si tu ne fais pas ce que je te demande, je te bâillonne, je t'attache au tuyau d'évacuation des eaux, et je fais sauter avant que tu n'aies eu le temps de te libérer.

In an increasingly schizophrenic pattern, and fired by sudden suspicion that his fictional Arab friend Sindbad has seduced his wife F., J.H. once again takes a discursive U-turn, this time from a pro-Palestinian to an anti-Palestinian stance, and begins disingenuously to interrogate Sindbad on his origins:

Sindbad, d'où viennent tes ancêtres ? essaye J.H..

Ils viennent de Ramallah, Palestine.

Et avant cela, où étaient-ils ?

Avant cela ? Je ne comprends pas.

Tu comprends très bien, Sindbad, que tes parents, installés à Ramallah, viennent de quelque part, Ramallah ne peut être un lieu d'où on vient, tes parents ont colonisé récemment la terre biblique, c'est ce qu'ils ont fait, je ne critique pas d'ailleurs, il fallait bien prendre racine, je rétablis juste la vérité historique (p. 79)

Having turned the anti-Israeli charge of colonization against the Arab, J.H. imagines a reply from Sindbad that once more represents a complete reversal. This time, though, it is not simply an ideological reversal, but also a reversal of stylistic and affective tenor, from humorous caricature to serious and even moving plea for recognition of Palestinian rights over the disputed territory of Israel. Four features are salient in the extract below: the mesmerism of Sindbad's incantatory style; the lyrical poignancy of his address; the push towards re-substantivization of what is currently only the adjective 'Palestinien', into 'la Palestine'; and the designation of the Israelis as occupiers.

Mes parents viennent de Ramallah, leurs parents viennent de Ramallah, c'est à Ramallah que je suis né, Sindbad n'est pas mon nom vrai mais je le garde par affection, par amitié pour toi, de Ramallah à Beyrouth je suis allé, Ali est mon vrai nom, c'est celui que j'ai porté à Ramallah, à Beyrouth, c'est sous ce nom que j'ai étudié, Sindbad aurait été un nom plus approprié mais ce n'est pas celui qui m'a été donné, je m'appelle Ali, suis né en Palestine, y ai grandi, c'est mon pays, la Palestine est mon pays, les occupants sont venus après nous, ils nous ont humiliés, nous sommes restés, pourquoi quitte-t-on le lieu où l'on est né et comment le quitte-t-on, est-ce qu'en le quittant je me défais de mes origines, est-ce que mes origines c'est le lieu où j'ai grandi, je ne suis pas un paysan, je ne travaille pas la terre, mais il y a quand même le lopin où je suis né, je suis indépendant, adulte, je parle une langue transnationale, extraterritoriale, une langue littéraire, mais il y a ce lieu où s'élevait ma maison, où vivaient mes parents, de là je viens, et ce lieu d'où je viens, c'est la Palestine. Je suis né en Palestine, je suis palestinien, c'est de la Palestine que je viens.

Part of what renders this soliloquy compelling is its concession of the suffering experienced by many of the Jews who helped to establish the State of Israel in the wake of the Shoah. Yet that concession is immediately superseded by focus on the Jewish act of occupation. And what renders Sindbad's soliloquy ultimately menacing is its mutation from anti-Zionism to anti-Semitism: he identifies the enemy to be overcome not as the Israelis specifically, but as Jews more generally (pp. 80-81). Ali's ambiguous (and of course,

imagined) demand that J.H. revert to Jewish type implies belief in ethnic determinism and a corresponding disbelief in the possibility of genuine Arab-Jew conciliation:

Je m'appelle Ali, je suis ton ami, on a mis des barbelés autour de nos terres, on nous a confisqué les sentiers pour y accéder, un jour je suis sorti, je ne pouvais plus revenir, j'ai regardé de l'autre côté du barbelé, d'où je viens, j'y ai vu ma mère et mon père, mais je ne pouvais pas y aller, pas les rejoindre, je suis resté de ce côté-ci [...] épargne-moi tes bons sentiments qui me coupent de ma terre, redeviens celui que tu dois être, le Juif inexorable, inflexible, recouvre-toi des certitudes que d'autres ont cousues pour toi dans un tissu d'orient souple et servile qui épousera exactement tes formes, qui a été fait pour toi, accepte de porter ce qui a été fait pour toi et laisse-moi partir.

Having imagined himself thus aggressed, J.H. goes on the offensive in a sudden burst of orthodox religiosity (despite his earlier condemnation of Judaism, deemed anachronistic, and of biblical Zionist tenets).

C'est le pays qui nous a été donné, Sindbad, contre cela tu ne peux combattre ou te révolter, les Juifs sont retournés sur les terres d'où ils viennent, n'ont commis aucune injustice, n'ont occupé aucun lieu qui n'ait été préalablement à eux, se sont abstenus de meurtres inutiles et de trop de rapines, sont récupéré ce qui leur appartenait depuis les origines [...] je vois maintenant que, comme tous les Arabes, tu es prêt à verser le sang, les Arabes trahissent même leurs amis, tu me hais, Sindbad [...] (pp. 84-85)

The imagined entrenching of the two in mutually hostile positions as a result of prolonged dialogue grimly mirrors the fate of all Middle Eastern peace talks so far in the extradiegetic world.

Rosenthal's narrative avoids making any kind of overt judgement on J.H.'s multiple discursive forays into the Middle Eastern conflict, and in point of fact it would be difficult to make any single such judgement, given their collectively self-contradictory nature. That said, close to the end of the novel the reader is given a potential hermeneutic key. Throughout the narrative, J.H.'s wife F. has been credited with wry good-sense and immunity to the ravings of her husband. Her verdict on his whim about emigrating to the Middle East therefore carries a certain authority:

Tu as été endoctriné, annonce F. Il n'y a rien de tes origines en Palestine.

Tu oublies les commencements. Tu oublies qu'au commencement, c'est là que nous vivions, répond J.H.

Nous ? demande-t-elle. Les tout premiers hommes sont nés dans la corne de l'Afrique. (p. 153)

In *Les Fantaisies spéculatives de J.H. le sémite*, polarized positions on the Middle Eastern conflict are dramatized and, more often than not, tacitly ridiculed. Yet not all is black and white, for interweaving the caricature are a number of ambiguous “truths”, although their status as such of course depends on the reader’s ideological disposition. It is precisely on such ambiguity that Rosenthal’s fantastical, often delirious narrative nimbly plays. In the quotation above, F.’s undermining of ethno-religious difference evokes J.H.’s not infrequent impulse to merge with the Other, be it Palestinian Arab or Jewish Woman (and on p. 129 the two figures are conjoined as common victims of patriarchal Judaism, both being excluded from dignity and from the right to say the Jewish Kaddish). One example of this impulse is ‘je veux apprendre ta langue, je veux apprendre tes coutumes, je veux devenir Palestinien’ (p. 71). Another is his surreal fantasy of dressing up as a Palestinian terrorist in the centre of Paris and of eventually being shot by a Hassidic Jew (p. 89). Of politico-ontological resonance in this wild fancy is the merging of Jewish and Palestinian identities. That merging is reprised towards the end of the novel:

[...] le marin Sindbad que j’ai choisis comme mon double, comme celui à qui je voudrais ressembler, je ressemble à Ali Mohamed, j’ai la même origine, je suis, comme lui, un sémite exilé, un autre, un immigré, je suis comme lui sorti de ma terre, je suis comme lui un déraciné, c’est en m’installant un moment en Palestine que je saurai que je me déracine en y allant, ce n’est pas mon pays, ce n’est pas mon sol, pas ma terre, pas mon territoire (pp. 154-155).

In these politico-ontological (con)fusions, one point is particularly noteworthy. One of the various names encrypted in the initials ‘J.H.’ is ‘Juif Honteux’. This mischievously exploits the dual meaning of ‘honteux’ – both ‘shameful’ (as he is seen to be by the traditional Jew, affronted by his defiance of what Žižek calls the traditional Jew’s ‘most basic *fidelity* to what one is’) and ‘ashamed’ (as he periodically feels as a Jew about Israeli conduct). That refusal of unicity on the linguistic level has a broader counterpart on the political and affective levels (a Bakhtinian function thoroughly consonant with the dialogism adopted by Rosenthal),¹⁷ connoting power dynamics that are thoroughly consonant with the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this sense, Rosenthal’s novel recalls the designation by the Jewish philosopher Jacques Derrida of ‘le monolinguisme imposé par l’autre, ici par une souveraineté d’essence toujours coloniale et qui tend, répressiblement et irrépressiblement, à réduire les langues à l’Un, c’est-à-dire à l’hégémonie de l’homogène’.¹⁸ On a simple level, Derrida’s observation can be figuratively related to Rosenthal’s refusal of a single authoritative discourse, or monolinguisism, on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This

refusal contrasts acutely with Osterreicher's monolingualism. On a more diffuse level, Derrida's references to colonialism, hegemony and homogeny are relevant to *Les Fantaisies spéculatives de J.H. le sémite* in more ways than one. Colonialism, as well as being a charge currently levelled against Israel, was in its British avatar the pre-history without which the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict may well not have arisen; and the post-history of French colonialism has produced the pro-Arab stance of the Fifth Republic that increasingly alienates French Jews. Hegemony over a subordinate human group infuses the operations, both past and present, of all these forms of colonialism. Finally, a certain avatar of homogeny is, ultimately, the one thing that Rosenthal's novel never refutes or even undercuts: the rapprochement of Jews and Palestinians as Semites. Of course, Jewish thinkers such as Finkelkraut would dismiss this rapprochement as mendacious:

Il y a de l'Autre. Il n'y a pas que du Même. Voilà pourquoi la seule paix juste entre Palestiniens et Israéliens passe par une séparation. [...] Toute autre solution est mensongère car dès lors que les Arabes seraient majoritaires en Israël, la situation des Juifs deviendrait impossible [...].¹⁹

Nevertheless, since the presence of the words 'le sémite' in the very title of the novel renders incontestable this part of J.H.'s otherwise evanescent identity, the rapprochement has a special significance. In the mercurial, postmodern play of Rosenthal's novel, in her indefinite deferral of ethnico-political meaning, that is the only stable "fact".

Whether this gets us anywhere either ethically or politically, though, is doubtful. But it is equally doubtful whether Osterreicher's righteous realism get us any further than Rosenthal's postmodern play. Osterreicher's rhetoric certainly has greater clarity than Rosenthal's. But its ideological unicity may preclude the possibility, however fragile, allowed by Rosenthal's novel: identification with and understanding, however partial and provisional, of the enemy Other. At first sight, Finkelkraut's statement above might seem very close to that of Emmanuel Levinas, another Jewish philosopher. As Simon Critchley observes, 'resistance of the other to the same' was 'a resistance that Levinas describes as ethical'.²⁰ And yet Levinas's resistance of the other to the same is of a very different order from Finkelkraut's. It emphasizes respect for the other's alterity, for the face of the other, whose difference may not be comprehended, but whose dignity as a human being must nonetheless be honoured. It is perhaps only on the basis of a Levinasian ethics that a politics of peace for the Middle East might ever succeed.

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- ¹ I am grateful to the British Academy for its support, which greatly facilitated the writing of this article.
- ² Olivia Rosenthal, *Les Fantaisies spéculatives de J.H. le sémite* (Paris: Editions verticales/ Le Seuil, 2005).
- ³ Chantal Osterreicher, *L'Insouciance d'Adèle* (Paris: Dorval Éditions, 2006).
- ⁴ Anny Dayan-Rosenman (translated by Rachel Nisselson and Robert St. Clair), 'The Israeli-Palestinian conflict in France: a conflict in search of novelistic representations', in Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller (editor), *Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in the Francophone World* (New York/ London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 81-92 (p. 91).
- ⁵ The acronym CRIF stands for Conseil représentatif des institutions juives de France.
- ⁶ Avi Primor, *Le Triangle des passions: Paris, Jérusalem, Berlin* (Paris: Bayard Éditions, 2000), p. 69.
- ⁷ Primor, op. cit., pp. 69-70.
- ⁸ De Gaulle made this remark at a press conference in November 1967.
- ⁹ Pierre Birnbaum, 'D'un État à l'autre?', in Denis Charbit (editor), *Les Intellectuels français et Israël* (Paris: Éditions de l'éclat, 2009), pp. 29-42 (pp. 40-41).
- ¹⁰ Esther Benbassa (translated by Alan Astro), 'How one becomes a traitor', in Debrauwere-Miller, pp. 232-249 (p. 243).
- ¹¹ Élie Barnavi, in Régis Debray, *À un ami israélien. Avec une réponse d'Elie Barnavi* (Paris : Flammarion, 2010), p. 147.
- ¹² Naomi Ragen, *The Covenant* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2004).
- ¹³ Such media bias has also been asserted by numerous secondary sources, of which the following is a small but representative sample. 'Le thème de la partialité de la presse française revient régulièrement dans les publications pro-Israéliennes. Par exemple, Paul Foster a participé à un ouvrage collectif intitulé *Nouveaux visages de l'antisémitisme* sous la forme d'un chapitre au titre évocateur : « 2001, l'odyssée des médias. Les médias sont-ils devenus antisémites ? ». Les deux premières phrases de cette contribution illustrent parfaitement les accusations de partialité à l'encontre des journalistes français : « Que se passe-t-il depuis l'Intifada de Kippour 2000 ? Comment se fait-il que les chars israéliens reculent devant des enfants, alors que les médias français accusent Israël de massacres massifs ? ». (Marc Hecker, *La défense des intérêts de l'État d'Israël en France* [Paris : l'Harmattan, 2005], pp. 93-94. The Foster quotation from is from Collectifs d'auteurs, *Nouveaux visages de l'antisémitisme* [Paris : NM7 Éditions, 2001], p. 221. Hecker refers to a further chapter in the same work which also draws attention to such bias : Clément Weill-Raynal's 'L'affaire du « Tunnel des mosquées » vue par l'Agence France Presse'.) 'Être l'ami d'Israël n'est pas du tout contraire à l'amitié traditionnelle de la France à l'égard du monde arabe et musulman. Bien des obstacles existent encore, le moindre n'étant pas le traitement par les médias, la télévision en particulier, des événements qui se déroulent à Gaza, par exemple. On commence par l'annonce d'un raid, d'une incursion terrible de troupes israéliennes, de blindés, d'hélicoptères, puis on va tout de même dire que des roquettes étaient tirées sur des villes israéliennes. Trop tard, l'opinion est déjà faite. Naturellement, les partisans du Hamas ne sont nullement des terroristes. Ils sont qualifiés d'activistes !' (Paul Marcus, *Soixante ans d'amour contrariées : les relations franco-israéliennes de 1948 à aujourd'hui* [Paris : Cherche Midi, 2008], pp. 277-78.)
- ¹⁴ See Marcus's remark in note 12 above.
- ¹⁵ I say 'potential' because the device of apostrophe to a putative friend who represents the antithesis of one's own ethico-political position has, of course, been exploited in order simply to condemn the position occupied by that friend. One prime example is Albert Camus's *Lettres à un ami allemand* (Lausanne : Marguerat, 1946); much more recently, we have Debray's *À un ami israélien. Avec une réponse d'Elie Barnavi* (2010).
- ¹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *In Defence Of Lost Causes* (London/ New York: Verso, 2008), pp. 4-5.
- ¹⁷ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981).
- ¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre: ou la prothèse d'origine* (Paris : Galilée, 1996), pp. 69.
- ¹⁹ Finkelkraut, in Alain Badiou and Alain Finkelkraut, *L'Explication. Conversation avec Aude Lancelin* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Lignes, 2010), p. 84.

²⁰ Simon Critchley, 'Introduction', in Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1-32 (p. 17). He is referring particularly to Levinas's *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité* (La Haye : M. Nijhoff, 1961).